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'The Light of East Asia'

Observations in England's Colony of Hong Kong

By Agnes Smedley

THERE IS A EUROPEAN DRAMA, written some forty years ago, entitled 'Children of Light.' It applies so aptly to Hongkong that I must explain it in the light of this colony's ever-recurring cholera epidemics—one of which is upon us now. But of course the story has universal application.

It is built around a well-to-do gentry family living in a stately manor house on an estate of old Russia. Above, in the clean, spacious rooms flooded with light, the members of the family discuss books, drama, philosophy, socialism, the soul, religion, and the success of some of their male relatives in the great city. It is an enchanting life and the talk is more than pleasant.

However, there is another side of the medal. The farm laborers—men, women and children—work endlessly on the estate, ignorant, somber, inarticulate, and from their labor rivulets of wealth pour into the family coffers. They live in insanitary huts which the ladies of the family avoid in their pleasant walks. The servants of the family live in small, dark basement rooms of the manor and they also are ignorant, somber, inarticulate. And, of course, the ladies or gentlemen of the family never demean themselves by going amongst them.

All goes well until some strange disease breaks out among the servants and carries off one member after another, and then spreads to the farm hands in the insanitary hovels. And then one member of the family, a frail gentlewoman, contracts the disease and dies within a few days. The children of light find themselves being overcome by the forces of darkness.

This old drama recurs to my mind almost daily, now

that I am in Hongkong, in the midst of the cholera epidemic.

Here is one of the greatest ports in Asia, where incalculable wealth has been made by the fortunate of the European and Chinese races. Here are palatial homes flooded with light. Here are modern hospitals, fine hotels where expensive drinks and food are served. Here are lovely gardens, tennis courts, recreation fields for the fortunate, a good water and plumbing system—for the well-to-do but not for the poor Chinese—and here are fine roads, some of the best in the world, over which roll an uninterrupted line of private cars. European and Chinese of the well-to-do, clad in white or colored silks, fill the streets, the lounges, dining rooms, gambling halls. The press carries photographs each day of weddings that cost more money than many 'children of darkness' earn in a lifetime of hard toil.

There are said to be around four hundred Chinese dollar millionaires in the city, very many of them so-called 'refugees' from Shanghai and other harassed cities of China who have fled here to live in ease on their money while their countrymen fight for their lives up in China. These rich refugees pay no income tax at all, and fight every attempt by the Hongkong Government to impose one. Some people even say that if they are taxed they will leave the Colony—as if that would be a loss! How many foreigners of British, American, and other nationality live here I do not know; but they have made their wealth out of the Chinese people—and they pay no income tax. We know that the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation is practically the master of Hongkong and that its

dividends before and since the war have been astronomical.

But there is another side to this medal also.

Here in this Colony is a teeming Chinese population, masses of whom are ignorant, somber, inarticulate, laboring eight to fourteen hours a day for a sub-human wage. Unkempt, disheveled women and children, clad in dirty, miserable rags, sometimes venture out into the clean streets to shock the white-clad passers-by. In the crowded Chinese sections of the city they live massed together in buildings, many of which are pitch-black, insanitary, without any water or plumbing system; or many live in small hovels on the city's outskirts. The fortunate Chinese and Europeans would never dream of venturing among them. Added to these unfortunates are over one hundred thousand refugees from Kwangtung Province who have fled here from the Japanese, and for whom the Medical Director of the Hongkong Government, aided by a few of the more advanced men and women of the Colony, has had to fight a step-by-step battle to get appropriations for feeding and housing. The fight, hardest of all, was to get not just soup kitchens where one miserable meal was offered each day, but to get through a budget that would provide the minimum essentials for human health.

Go into the homes of the Chinese who have lived for decades in Hongkong and who are not refugees: there you see the origin of diseases that blossom in poverty, ignorance and dirt. Up narrow, dark stairways you come into pitch-black rooms, filled with so-called beds. People sleep on dirty beds, on the floors under the beds, on tiers of beds, in the cock-loft and on beds suspended by ropes from the beams of the roof. People rent bed-space for a few hours, and then are rooted out to give place to others. Still other people sleep on the streets. Some twenty thousand Chinese are known as 'street sleepers' and other thousands are known as 'roof squatters'—men, women and children who stretch out at night to sleep on the open pavements or merely squat on the roofs as they sleep. You can pass through great areas of Hongkong at night and see the sidewalks dark with bodies of human beings, covered perhaps with some thin dirty cloth. There are too many to put in the sanitary and well-managed refugee camps, and we hear always that, anyway, there is not enough money

to feed more. In such Chinese sections of the city you pass haggard coolies carrying buckets of night-soil or garbage. Baths? Who spoke of luxury? Yet on nights when we have blackouts, as we did for three nights in succession recently, even this night-soil and garbage can't be removed because the streets must be deserted.

It was on such nights that this new cholera epidemic began, and it began in these poor sections of the city where there is no plumbing system.

For years the medical workers, under the direction of the Medical Director of the Government, have struggled to get a plumbing and water system throughout the city, for the poor Chinese as well as for the rich. Who opposed them? The men who opposed them were the rich. The rich foreigners opposed it because it would mean more money to be raised by local taxes. The rich Chinese opposed it because some of them have a monopoly of night-soil and garbage removal, and a plumbing system would interfere with their profits. The evil fruits of such a policy are hundreds of cholera victims each spring and summer; sometimes thousands. The cost of such a policy is fearful, for the Medical Department must be mobilized each year to cope with the scourge, to treat cases, to bury the dead, to try and do a little palliative cleaning up here and there.

At times reports are published in the local press which reflect conditions in which the Chinese poor live; the Chinese from whose daily toil countless small rivulets of profit flow into the coffers of the fortunate Chinese and Europeans. You read in the published Medical Report for 1938 that Chinese infant mortality is 343 per thousand, while the mortality of non-Chinese infants is 42 per thousand. You read of poor Chinese sentenced to prison or fined for stealing petty sums; of a Chinese coolie who dumped the body of his child on a garbage heap. It had had beri-beri and died on the way to the hospital. He did not have money enough to bury it. Beri-beri is a disease of semi-starvation. But this is not the only case of this kind; it is a daily occurrence. The International Settlement of Shanghai maintains a death wagon that goes about the streets each day picking up the dead. In no year, even before the war began, were there ever less than 32,000 dead bodies picked up from the Settlement alone—and this leaves out the French Concession and Chinese territory. Of course Hongkong is more en-

lightened and authority is centralized, but still this is one of the big problems of the city.

There are many fine hospitals in Hongkong: the palatial Queen Mary Hospital, for instance, the Kowloon Hospital, the Tsan Yuk Maternity hospital. These are Government hospitals, perhaps the best equipped in the Far East, and they are fitted with the latest in medical equipment. Fortunately, medicine is partly socialized in Hongkong and the poor can be treated without cost. But what a weird picture: these white palatial hospitals with the finest equipment, staffed by some of the best medical men from the British Colonial Medical Service, trying to combat diseases of human starvation! From 12,000 to 15,000 patients pass through the portals of the Queen Mary alone each year; and of these 40% are poor Chinese who pay nothing at all. They are paid for by the Government in third-class wards which are clean, beautiful, and well-cared for. For each such third-class patient, the Hongkong Government pays HK\$3.00* per day. Kowloon Hospital, also a Government institution, also cares for about 40% free patients a year. It sounds like a very good system; until you study the patients themselves. Many of them suffer from beri-beri, pellagra, and tuberculosis, all diseases of semi-starvation. Tuberculosis is not exclusively that, of course, but it is also that, particularly so with the poor Chinese. The infection quite naturally spreads in the insanitary conditions in which the masses of the people live.

So many rich people, or people who find thought a burden, complacently declare that the Chinese have no complaint coming because the Colony provides free medical treatment. Yes, but it is a kind of insanity, even with this. A child, let us say, suffering from a disease of malnutrition, is kept in a hospital for three or four months, at a cost of HK\$3 per day. HK\$90 per month, or HK\$270 for three months—more than its father earns in an entire year, or even two years. It is given a special diet, expert medical care, and after a time is either cured or partially cured. Obviously it cannot be kept permanently in the hospital. It is discharged, cured or on the way to cure. A few whose parents are 'street sleepers' or 'roof squatters,' or who rent a bed space in a pitch-black loft, can be sent to a refugee camp or to a mission establishment—which is

HK\$4 = U.S.\$1

no solution of the problem at all, but merely a temporary palliative. The mass of such cases are returned to their dark, insanitary homes where parents earn \$10 to \$20 per month. And within two or three months the same child or adult is back again in the hospital for another three months or so, at the same cost to the Government; \$500 a year may be spent on such a case. On the very face of it, this is insanity. The chief almoner (social worker) in charge of, say, Queen Mary Hospital, may send out assistants to follow up the released child and advise the parents to provide a certain diet for it. The mother can only look dumbly at the social worker. She has no money for a special diet—furthermore, she does not know the meaning of a special diet. Even if a free bottle of milk is delivered to her each day for the child, she often sells it to get a little extra money to help feed the whole family.

In the Maternity Hospital at Tsan Yuk, women must pay for lying-in—if they can afford it. Pregnancy is, after all, not an infectious disease, but is one's own individual responsibility. Those who do not wish children can go to one of the four birth control clinics maintained in the Colony in connection with Government Women's and Children's Welfare Clinics. The cost is nothing. Yet even despite this, the Medical Department of the Government is enlightened enough to admit women to the Maternity Hospital without charge if they cannot pay. A study of the patients in that hospital show that many of them—very many indeed—also suffer from beri-beri, pellagra, and tuberculosis, which complicates their pregnancy.

It is of value, and a study of importance, that the Medical Department of the Government has led the campaign in the Colony not only for socialized medicine, but even for a minimum wage and the eight-hour day. They have done this not only because of their social consciousness, but also because they see the insane waste of life and health, and of money, due to the present profit system.

Profits made by either Chinese or Europeans in this Colony have their origin in the labor of the people, or in trade with the people. The very existence of millionaires or other well-to-do, automatically reveals the huge profits that have been made or are being made out of the labor of the people. High profits means that

wages must be very low, for the major part of profits comes from labor.

On dinner tables in Hongkong you often see sugared ginger. Large numbers of Chinese women labor ten hours a day, at a wage of ten cents a day, cleaning this ginger. It is just such conditions as this that give rise to beri-beri, pellagra, tuberculosis, typhoid, and cholera, diseases that kill not only the victims affected, but that spread and infect and kill the more fortunate.

Let us take records of the Anti-Tuberculosis Association of Hongkong, an organization in which so many medical men, social workers, and the more advanced elements of the population take part to combat this disease. If you talk with the members of the Association, you will hear the ever-recurring statement that this disease has its origin in poverty and ignorance. But poverty and ignorance are the result of the profit system, and the profit system beats men, women and children down into the dust in order to reap harvests for the owners. Here are a few concrete records of tubercular patients which I list because many people say that these tubercular patients are refugees and are the responsibility, not of Hongkong, but of China:

A Chinese woman factory worker, 34 years of age, 12 years in the Colony (not a refugee). She works 12 hours a day and earns HK\$10 to HK\$12 per month. She rents one room for \$5 a month. The factory is overcrowded and insanitary. Who can live a decent life free from disease on such a wage?

A Chinese book-keeper, 20 years resident in the Colony. He works 14 hours a day, earns \$15 a month, sleeps in the shop where he works.

A Chinese coolie, 29 years in the Colony, working eight hours a day at heavy physical labor, drawing wages of HK\$10 a month, and sleeping in a rented bed-space with dozens of others, for \$2 a month.

A factory worker who pastes trade marks on electric torches for eight hours a day at a wage of HK\$7 per month, and rents a bed-space for 80 cents per month in a dark, insanitary building. He was born in this Colony.

If you study the records of the Anti-Tubercular Association, you will find thousands of other cases of Chinese born in this Colony, or domiciled here for one or two decades, who have given their health that a few fortunate people might live in comfort or luxury. Of

course many people will say they themselves are not responsible for this. True. No individual as such is responsible—though I must say that here, where we have a Colony of only a million and a half people, the rich can almost be held individually responsible. They can see the results of the system which they support, right outside their doors, or if they take a run down the streets in their cars. They are the 'Children of Light,' and this is their Colony in the literal sense of that word.

Is it any wonder that infectious diseases and diseases due entirely to poverty, such as beri-beri and pellagra, can take root in this Colony and, within three weeks, carry off over 400 human beings—as has happened here these past weeks? Lowered resistance due to malnutrition furnishes fertile soil in which cholera can take root and spread, and the large number of deaths from cholera were people who did not have the resistance to overcome the disease they had contracted, even when treatment was of the most scientific.

Since the present Sino-Japanese war, the prices of foodstuffs and other life necessities have increased very much, yet wages have not kept pace with the rise in the cost of living. True, a few public-spirited employers, pressed by the Medical Department, have increased wages a little. But if you investigate the extent of their raised wages, you sometimes find that this is not more than \$2 per month. One important company raised wages from 30 to 50%, but if you investigate, you find that this was an increase of only \$2 to \$5 per month; percentages mean almost nothing. These increases meant, at the most, nothing but just enough to keep life in the human body and permit men to continue living at a sub-human level—and breeding more men to take their places, when they themselves die at an early age from labor carried on at a level that is a disgrace to the human race. Is mere living and breeding the life aim of the human being?

Public-spirited employers who do raise wages say that they are exposed to unfair competition by those who lack essential humanitarian principles. Humanitarian principles seldom influence employers in any country. But it seems that cholera alone ought to be a threat to their lives sufficient to make them increase wages merely as a measure of self-protection. To show what such men are made of, I have heard some reply that they can be inoculated against cholera.

'Ah ha!' they exclaim, as if to say, 'We've demolished your argument there.' They are satisfied that they can be immune to diseases while others sink.

Another problem must be mentioned here also: since the present war began, large numbers of Chinese women and girls, refugees, or natives of Hongkong, have had to take to the streets to make a living. Across the Bay in Kowloon, the streets are filled with them at night, waiting before theaters and restaurants or in dark doorways. Some are even very young girls of twelve or thirteen years of age. Policemen, watchmen, and others whose duty is supposed to be the protection of the community, collect a regular percentage from them. There is also still the sale of women and girls into brothels or for transport to other ports for prostitution. These girls come from peasant or working-class families whose wages are too low to maintain them. When I see these girls waiting for men in an attempt to get enough money to pay for a bowl of rice, I think of the Peak homes of the rich Europeans, and of the four hundred Chinese millionaires who, with their useless families, have moved to Hongkong since the war began, leaving the peasant-soldiers of China to fight the war. Brothers and husbands of many of these women walking the streets of the Colony are soldiers in the Chinese armies, fighting for the country's liberation. They are also fighting for the principles of democracy and upon their success depends the fate of Hongkong itself.

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There are good men in this Colony, and they struggle against a system which they are called upon to live in. Some of them are liberal and humanitarian in thought, some very decidedly social-minded in knowledge and in action. Recently the Governor, Sir Geoffrey Northcote, with Dr. Ronald Hall, Bishop of Hongkong, reviewed an athletic meet of Chinese children from the public schools—schools, by the way which are not free, but which must be paid for, a system which dooms tens of thousands of Chinese children to illiteracy as well as poverty. The Governor and the Bishop watched the athletic meet and were shocked at the sight, for the bodies of the children competing were thin, scrawny, undernourished. Many of them threw their frail bodies into the athletics, but it was pitiful to see them. None of these children were refugees—all

were natives of Hongkong, and British citizens by virtue of that fact, should they care to claim such citizenship.

Englishmen with social vision, in Hongkong and China, try to alter conditions in so far as they can within the framework of the present order—and nothing much beyond this can be done at present. The Colony has had an unusually liberal Governor in Sir Geoffrey Northcote. He has supported every good social measure and, in addition, supported and even led in the relief work for China. Dr. Selwyn-Clarke, Medical Director of the Colony, and the medical workers under his command, are called upon to cope actively with epidemics like cholera and with sub-nutritional diseases that have their roots in poverty. These medical workers face daily the waste of life and wealth due to the profit system; and it is no wonder that Dr. Selwyn-Clarke and his tireless wife, Hilda Selwyn-Clarke, have led the campaign for a variety of social changes, including the eight-hour day and a minimum wage, with an immediate increase in all wages to keep pace with the rising cost of living.

But since no trade unions are allowed to exist in the Colony, such advanced men can only argue, plead, demand, manipulate, or try to frighten; they have no people's organizations behind them in their struggle. So even the best English leaders are hamstrung in their efforts to make any but slight changes in conditions. The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation is more powerful than they are; it is, in fact, the invisible dictator of the Colony.

Yet, historically viewed, these advanced Englishmen in Hongkong and China prove that progressive forces the world over have strong allies in all kinds of queer places. Sir Archibald Clark-Kerr, British Ambassador to China, has won the friendship and respect of all who wish to see China strong, victorious, really democratic. Bishop Hall of Hongkong, a sincere and devout man, has stood with Mrs. Selwyn-Clarke in the forefront of all projects that could strengthen or bring relief to the Chinese people in any way, both in Hongkong and up in China. These two have headed the British Relief Fund to aid China, the Foreign Auxiliary of the Chinese Red Cross to aid the Chinese wounded, the International Committee of the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives, and a variety of other groups

—including a cooperative farm in Hongkong and, with the Medical Director of the Government, the project to organize, train and settle Chinese refugees in Hongkong, on cooperative farms. He and the Medical Director were among the chief factors behind the plan for Government purchase of rice, soya beans, and firewood; for the transport of these commodities on Government-chartered boats; for their sale in Hongkong at the lowest possible price to the Chinese population. This was a measure against war profiteering, and, of course, was fought by the vested interests.

Again, it was the growth of sickness and disease amongst the Chinese people that gave rise to this, in part, and literally forced the plan through. It was carried out swiftly and efficiently, and once more it was demonstrated that the profit system is wasteful and destructive and against the interests of all but the very small minority who profit by it.

The few social measures undertaken and carried through by the Hongkong Government, open broad vistas of what really could be done in the Colony. The wealth that exists here, both Chinese and European—if properly administered for the public welfare—could make Hongkong a small democratic paradise, a model for all East Asia. There are even enough advanced lower officials here to achieve such an end. I have met many of these young men, fundamentally influenced by advanced social thought of England, who waste their youth and energies merely marking time within the framework of the present system; they are critical, discontented, forward-looking. Some ministers of religion write constantly in the press exposing social conditions among the Chinese, battling against a system that is out-of-date and destructive even of itself. They realize that even under the present system Hongkong could set a standard of living for its inhabitants that could wipe out epidemics and diseases of malnutrition.

But in reality? Poor men, treated in Queen Mary Hospital for subnutritional diseases for months, throw themselves from its upper balconies rather than go back into the dark depths of poverty from which they were taken to be cured.

How to meet this problem of suicide? Apart from the efforts already mentioned, steel bars are to be bought to place around the balconies of Queen Mary Hospital to prevent people from hurling themselves to death.

Except geographically, Hongkong is not the 'Light of East Asia.' It does not set the example that a few of its most advanced men would like it to set. Instead, it has adopted standards that are at times lower than many modern cities of China of which I have personal knowledge.

Civilization must be measured, not by the wealth of a minority, but by the general welfare of the majority of its people. That welfare includes freedom from the fear of insecurity, of the future, of life. This seems to me a basic truth which constitutes the main issue before the whole world today. I know it would be utopian to believe that Hongkong could break from the world system prevailing. It would be destroyed if it tried. But even within the framework of the present system it could stand in the forefront and try to prove to us that the system has some advantages, and that it can work. I personally do not know if it could prove anything of the kind, but if people continue vociferously to defend the present system, it seems they ought to do something to prove what they are talking about. To point to the fine motor roads, the race courses, the golf links and tennis courts and the cocktail lounges of this city cannot convince 80 percent of the Chinese population, nor the more advanced English population; for these are but conveniences and playgrounds for the well-to-do. And the hospitals are but a breakwater temporarily holding back the dark flood of human destitution.

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I know that there are Englishmen in Hongkong who think it bad manners for an American to raise a voice of criticism about a British Colony. The facts in this article have been furnished me by British officials who have, in addition, given me facilities to investigate conditions for myself. We who think along lines of social change, are not bound by national or racial frontiers. We know that conditions similar to these of Hongkong also exist in my own country, America—particularly in the South—and in other countries. Yet that does not mean that we are to wash our hands of Hongkong any more than we are to keep silent about similar conditions elsewhere.

If we use the word democracy, it should have meaning. Otherwise we should find another word to properly describe the realities of the present system.